



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Matot-Masei 5772

By Sigal Samuel

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In *Parashat Matot-Masei*, the tribes of Reuven and Gad come to Moses with a strange request. Instead of settling in Canaan with the rest of the Israelites, they wish to settle on the east side of the Jordan River. Their stated rationale is purely pragmatic: the trans-Jordan pastures are perfect for raising livestock, which Reuven and Gad have in great supply.

When Moses first hears their request, he believes they are simply using their livestock as an excuse to avoid going to battle when it comes time to conquer Canaan. “Your brothers are going to go to war,” he says, “and you are going to sit *here*?”¹ At this point, Reuven and Gad amend their proposal, vowing to accompany the Israelites—and even to fight on the front lines—in exchange for being allowed to settle east of the Jordan River.

While Moses is right to suspect Reuven and Gad of harboring an ulterior motive, I believe he has misidentified what that motive actually is. After all, their willingness to take the lead in the war shows that they are not lazy or afraid to die. Close attention to the language of their proposal suggests, instead, that they are afraid of the harm that may befall their *children* if they are forced to cross the Jordan as a family. Although the men initially couch their request in terms of livestock, the issue of their children’s safety creeps into their speech—not once, but three times. First, they state that they will build “cities for our children” east of the Jordan River. Next, they explain that, while they go off to war, “our children will dwell in the fortified cities.” Finally, they insist that “our children will stay behind,” far away from the battle.²

These men’s concern for their children’s safety during a time of war makes sense given the preceding chapter’s events. Earlier in *Parashat Matot*, the Israelites invade Midian, killing every man, non-virgin female and male child, and taking captive every female child.³ Having just witnessed the bloodcurdling impact of war on children, Reuven and Gad are especially sensitive to the horrific fate that could befall their own children during the battle over Canaan.

Sadly, these ancient tribes are not the only ones witnessing the devastating effects of war on children; in recent years, we too have seen society’s most vulnerable members bear the brunt of war’s tragic consequences. According to UNICEF’s 1996 report, over the preceding decade 2 million children were killed in armed conflict, while 6 million were seriously injured or permanently disabled.⁴ This does not include the many children who became refugees, orphans or victims of rape, sexual slavery, disease or malnutrition as the result of war. When we imagine, as Reuven and Gad did, a reality in which these issues personally affect the children we know and love, we begin to get a feel for what’s at stake.

¹ Numbers 32:6.

² Numbers 32:16, 17, and 26, respectively.

³ Numbers 31:1-20.

⁴ “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,” UNICEF 1996. <http://www.unicef.org/graca/>

UNICEF's report highlights the fact that, due to the changing nature of modern warfare, children are now more frequently exposed to brutality than ever before. Because today's wars are often waged within states as opposed to between them—because the battle has moved off the battlefield and into the street—the proportion of war victims who are children has risen dramatically in recent decades. Worse, tens of thousands of children have been forcibly recruited as combatants—a practice that persists in many countries, despite the fact that international law prohibits the participation of children under 18 in armed conflict.⁵ For example, in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—a country wracked by decades of civil war—a significant number of child soldiers still remain among the armed groups resisting official efforts at demobilization.⁶ These children incur lasting psychological damage on a scale few of us can fathom.

Fortunately, several organizations are doing the vital work of rehabilitating children affected by armed conflict. In DRC, AJWS grantee AJEDI-Ka/Projet Enfants Soldats reintegrates former child soldiers into their communities through family reunifications and vocational training; it also reports on child rights violations and prevents the recruitment of child soldiers.⁷ In Uganda, AJWS grantee Friends of Orphans provides financial support for education and vocational training to children who were abandoned or orphaned as the result of war.⁸ Because grassroots organizations like these are best placed to assess and care for the needs of their countries' youth, supporting them is an effective means of helping children recover from the harmful effects of war.

The impact of war on children is so disturbing that most of us are inclined to push it to the back of our minds. This, I suspect, is what the majority of the Israelite tribes must have done when they charged into battle with their children in tow. Yet Reuven and Gad's bold request in this week's *parashah* provides us with an alternative paradigm. It reminds us that we must do everything in our power to protect the world's youngest citizens from the crushing effects of war—a responsibility that is as pressing today as it was thousands of years ago.



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⁵ "Children and Human Rights," *Amnesty International*. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/children>

⁶ Martin Bell, "Child Alert: Democratic Republic of Congo," UNICEF 2006. http://www.unicef.org/childalert/drc/content/Child_Alert_DRC_en.pdf

⁷ "AJEDI-Ka/Projet Enfants Soldats." <http://www.ajedika.org/>

⁸ "Friends of Orphans." <http://frouganda.org/>

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